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Perez Family: Ernestine Cardenas (Middle)

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ERNESTINE CARDENAS

There are many cultures in the world with defined guidelines that determine whether one is an adult or still a child. Some of these guidelines are life events or rituals. In most of the United States, you are considered an adult upon attaining the age of eighteen. From that day forth, the law and society will treat you as an adult, with adult responsibilities. Native American tribes signify one's adulthood in a variety of different ways depending on specific tribal traditions.

Ernestine Cardenas grew up on a small reservation in this country where her family made a home on the 40 acres of tribal land. On the peaceful reservation, Ernestine could be free to wander and play. Ernestine and her family were involved with their tribe and its traditions that had been handed down for generations.

Under its customs, children were treated differently from adults. One of the most obvious, to her, was that children were the first to eat. As a girl, Ernestine would be the first one in her family to get her meal. She knew that she would be an adult in the eyes of her tribe when she no longer was accorded that privilege.

From being so closely connected with the Native American community, Ernestine eventually received the name Little Lion. This name was given to her because of her head of beautiful, long hair that often blew wild and resembled a lion's thick, billowing mane.

As the eldest child in her family, Ernestine was not allowed to play with dolls. Instead, by the time she was sixteen, Ernestine was already responsible for some household duties, such as paying bills, buying groceries, and taking care of three sisters and two brothers. Rather than being resentful or discouraged, Ernestine accepted these roles gladly because of the values instilled in her by her great-grandmother. Ernestine admired her great-grandmother for the elder

woman's way of living. Ernestine remembers how her great-grandmother would be the first to share what she had with those who were not as fortunate.

By witnessing first-hand the gratitude and happiness of those who received help, Ernestine gained a better perspective on life. The experience taught her to live with an open heart. This compassion for others helped Ernestine as she grew into adulthood.

Unfortunately, around the time she was 14 years old, Ernestine began to develop kidney problems. Although she was still able to continue meeting her household responsibilities, her illness grew worse, eventually requiring surgical intervention by the time she was 17. At the worst times during her illness, Ernestine felt that she "would leave the world the way God sent her." She feels this way so strongly that she continues to live her life ready to face whatever confronts her.

In Ernestine's family, each of the children was expected to live in the parental home, even as an adult. Leaving the family to set up housekeeping in a separate apartment or house was not permitted. The only way someone was allowed to leave the family household was after marriage. When Ernestine married at the age of 19, it was a definitive end to her childhood and the beginning of her adult life. She was now part of another household, starting her own family.

After marriage Ernestine continued to go to school because she felt education was very important. She had worked as a farm laborer while she was growing up and was convinced that working in the fields all her life was "not the route" for her. She interrupted her own education to raise a family. Eventually, Ernestine had three girls and a boy who are her pride and joy. Although she brought up her children as Catholics, she believes that following a particular religion is a choice that each person must decide individually. Ernestine did not want her children to feel forced into a religion that she chose, letting them know that other options were always open to them.

Even as adults, Ernestine's son and daughters know that they have their mother's support and have only to ask if they need something. They have returned that support and are proud that Ernestine has gone back to school to acquire a teaching credential.

As a loving parent of three daughters and a son, Ernestine considers her children as her greatest achievement. Treasuring her ethnic heritage, she has passed on its wisdom and instilled in them her people's collective pride. Her children have learned tribal values and customs and can perform traditional Indian ceremonial dances. The family still attends tribal functions—where Ernestine still eats first. Perhaps, after all, she remains a child at heart.

"Make the best of your life, but do it the good way."

- Ernestine Cardenas

Author: Lindsey Gaines
Interviewer: Aeko Yoshikawa
Ethnic Group: Native American
Generation: Middle